

Media Players

Your PC is the perfect way to play video and music files, but how do you keep your multimedia collection under control? Ben Pitt tests six of the best media players to find out

The rise of music download sites and MP3 players means it's often the PC's hard disk rather than the CD shelf that forms the central repository for music collections. Keeping it in order is no mean feat, but organising and transferring large quantities of data are tasks the PC was designed for, so there's no excuse for software that's awkward or underpowered.

Organising large MP3 collections is the primary role for media players, but most include a wide range of supporting features. They can all play Wav and WMA files (iTunes converts the latter on import) and burn

playlists to CD, and most can convert CDs and music files to MP3 and a range of other formats. Internet radio is built in to each one and most can play videos, too.

You probably already have media playback software you've been using for a while, but is it the best one for the job? Most of these programs are free, but it still requires a fair amount of time and patience to work out which one best meets your needs. Luckily, we've saved you the bother, pitting the six leading packages against each other to find those that will get your PC hitting all the right notes.

APPLE iTunes 7.3

★★★★★

Free

iTunes needs no introduction thanks to its association with the iPod and iTunes Music Store, the two biggest phenomena to hit the music industry in recent

years. It's also a slick piece of software for organising large music collections and includes a range of other features such as internet radio, podcasts, video support and unrestricted conversion between audio CD, MP3, AAC and Wav formats.

The application presents its music library as a single list of tracks, which works well. Switching to sort by artist, album or any other criterion is near-instantaneous, and typing the beginning of a name brings up that artist or album. Version 7 adds the ability to browse using a virtual carousel of CD covers, and missing artwork is downloaded automatically from iTunes Store. There's no Now Playing feature for creating playlists on the fly, but it's easy to create a playlist and use it for this purpose. Smart playlists are also available, filtering tracks from your library by anything from year to play count.

Video support is nicely implemented, too, with its own browser presenting attractive thumbnails, but format support is limited to QuickTime, MPEG4 and 3GP. Aside from this drawback, however, iTunes is a rewarding program without any significant flaws and with plenty of strengths.



▲ iTunes presents its library as a single list of tracks

SUMMARY

- ✓ Attractive, friendly interface
- ✓ Converts between audio formats
- ✗ Basic video support

MEDIA PLAYER Requires Windows 2000 (SP4)/XP/Vista (32-bit), 500MHz processor, 256MB RAM
SUPPLIER www.itunes.com
DETAILS www.itunes.com

MAGIX MP3 Maker 12

★★★

£20 inc VAT

MP3 Maker 12 is the only software on test that isn't free, and it follows Magix' trend for masses of features and a slightly bewildering interface. As a result, it took us quite some time to find the button for ripping a CD to MP3 format.

MP3 is one of eight available formats for encoding, along with Ogg Vorbis and AAC, and files can be converted from one to another. Video support is reasonable, with the ability to play MPEG2, AVI and some QuickTime files, but playback often took a long time to initialise.

The folder-style presentation of the music library looks untidy, and instead of displaying track names it shows the name of the file. Other tags are displayed correctly, though. The library doesn't respond to typing in names, but it's extremely fast to scroll through and can be sorted by a wide range of criteria.

Additional features include a virtual DJ console for mixing tracks, a facility for finding duplicate files, various audio effects and an Audio ID feature, which fills in missing track information based on an audio signature. These are all welcome, but they're not particularly well executed. The stereo editor is better and might be useful for truncating tracks for use as MP3 ringtones. However, it's not enough to justify the expense over the free players on test.



▲ The folder style of Magix MP3 Maker 12 is rather untidy

SUMMARY

- ✓ Masses of features
- ✗ Untidy interface
- ✗ Not a free product

MEDIA PLAYER Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 800MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 300MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.saversoftware.co.uk
DETAILS www.magix.com

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MICROSOFT

Windows Media Player 11

★★★★★

Free

It's easy to take Windows Media Player for granted because it comes bundled with Windows XP and Vista, but it can't be beaten for format support, particularly for the latest video camera standards such as HDV and hard disk-based cameras. Version 11 also includes excellent music library management and synchronisation with a wide range of portable players.

Six buttons across the top provide quick access to the Now Playing list, music library, online stores plus Rip, Burn and Sync functions. The library is much improved in version 11, with each artist represented by a pile of CDs; the more albums by that artist, the more CDs in the pile. Clicking on an artist presents each album with individual track listings. The library can also be browsed by artist, year, genre, folder and various other options. The software acts as a UPnP server for streaming music to network-attached playback devices and keeps an eye on music folders for new tracks added with other software.

CD ripping is available in MP3, WMA and Wav formats, but options are limited to bit rate. Songs already on the hard disk cannot be converted to another format. Also, playlists created in Library view don't appear in Burn view without being saved and re-imported. Still, these are the few exceptions in an otherwise extremely elegant application.



▲ Artists in Windows Media Player 11 are represented by piles of CDs

SUMMARY

- ✓ Vast audio and video format support
- ✓ Efficient library browsing
- ✗ Cannot convert between formats

MEDIA PLAYER Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista, 233MHz processor, 64MB RAM (1.5GHz, 512MB recommended), 200MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.microsoft.com
DETAILS www.microsoft.com

NULLSOFT

WinAmp 5.35

★★★

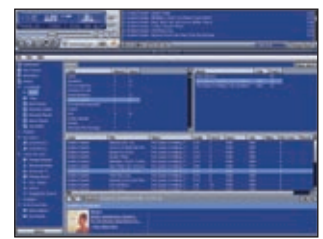
Free

WinAmp was the first MP3 software for the PC, and with a claimed 57 million users it must be doing something right. It has been two years since it received a major update, though, and the interface looks dated with its abundance of docked panels and small text.

Even so, it's an efficient system for managing large music collections, sorting by artist or album without the need to switch modes. An info panel at the bottom displays artwork and news stories that relate to the artist in question. We particularly like how music quickly fades out rather than stopping abruptly when interrupted.

CDs and files on hard disk can be converted to AAC, WMA, FLAC or Wav format, but MP3 encoding is available only in WinAmp Pro (\$15, around £7.50). The free version is also limited to eight-speed CD ripping and burning. Video playback features are better than most, with support for a range of formats and the ability to create video playlists, and WinAmp's visualisations are the best around. Its proprietary ShoutCast internet radio format is well populated with high-quality stations, and Shoutcast TV gave us the unexpected treat of a live webcam feed of some Polish storks.

WinAmp is a pleasure to use, but it needs free MP3 encoding and Windows Vista support before we can recommend it.



▲ WinAmp 5.35's interface looks dated, with lots of docked panels

SUMMARY

- ✓ Efficient music library management
- ✓ Plenty of well-implemented extras
- ✗ No MP3 encoding in free version

MEDIA PLAYER Requires Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP/2003, 500MHz Pentium III processor, 64MB RAM (1.5GHz P4, 128MB RAM recommended), 15MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.winamp.com
DETAILS www.winamp.com

REAL

RealPlayer 10.5 Basic

★★

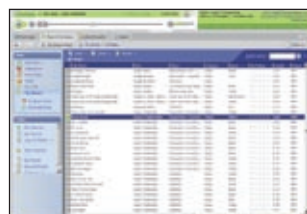
Free

RealPlayer built its success on RealAudio and RealVideo, which were once the dominant formats for streaming media. Today, however, these formats have less of a stronghold. Each time the player is launched, it greets you with an online homepage that is dominated by adverts for premium content and other products. This is common throughout the software; selecting the option to convert audio files to a different format resulted in an advert telling us to upgrade, rather than the feature itself.

Format support is generally excellent; we were even able to play protected AAC files bought from iTunes. DVD playback is included, too, but MPEG4 video isn't, and widescreen MPEG2 and DV footage was displayed at the wrong aspect ratio.

Music library browsing sometimes felt friendly, but at other times had us stumped. Tracks are displayed as a single list or browsed by artist, album or genre, but the Now Playing list is confusing, and jumping to a letter of the alphabet is awkward. At one point, we struggled to import AAC and WMA files, but at other times had no problems doing so.

RealPlayer has its strengths, but life's too short to put up with its intrusive advertising.



▲ Library browsing in RealPlayer 10.5 Basic is a little bit erratic

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent format support
- ✗ Aggressive advertising
- ✗ Occasionally confusing interface

MEDIA PLAYER Requires Windows 98 SE/Me/NT4 (SP6)/2000 (SP2)/XP, Pentium II 350MHz, 64MB RAM (128MB on Windows XP), 52MB disk space
SUPPLIER <http://uk.real.com>
DETAILS <http://uk.real.com>

YAHOO!

Music Jukebox 2.2

★★★

Free

Yahoo! Music Jukebox is the only player on test not to support video files, but you can use its music-playback facilities alongside Windows Media Player's excellent video support. It provides a gateway to Yahoo!'s US-only music download store, but can also operate as a jukebox for existing music collections. It's developed from MusicMatch Jukebox, which Yahoo! acquired in 2004, but the similarities are hard to spot.

The Browse by Artist view presents a list of artists, thumbnails of album artwork and a list of tracks, and typing the beginning of a name provides an easy way to jump to a particular artist or album. However, we found the software's ability to list album tracks in the correct order erratic. Most appeared correctly, but some had one or two tracks out of place and others were all over the place. The problem is resolved by sorting by track number rather than album, but this column had to be re-enabled every time we ran the software. Playback doesn't continue to the next track in a list, so to hear an album you need to double-click the album thumbnail or add each track to the Now Playing list.

With no ability to convert audio files to other formats, Yahoo! Music Jukebox doesn't have enough to recommend it.



▲ Browse by Artist presents a list of artists, tracks and album artwork

SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple interface for music playback
- ✗ Erratic track order listing
- ✗ Can't convert audio file formats

MEDIA PLAYER Requires Windows XP (SP2), 300MHz Pentium III processor, 128MB RAM, 35MB disk space, Internet Explorer 6, WMP 9
SUPPLIER <http://music.yahoo.com/jukebox>
DETAILS <http://music.yahoo.com/jukebox>